

## Chancellor's Community Forum

A New Approach to Student Discipline

Sousa Middle School

January 28, 2009

6:00 pm – 8:00 pm

**Discussion Leader: Joseph Edwards**

### Overview:

Community members provided insights regarding student discipline (as proposed in Chapter 25, DCMR). Collectively, they asked for clearer terminology and narrower distinction between tiers. This would establish greater fairness for students and accountability among discipline-enforcers. Furthermore, community members felt that the current policy language lacks the instructive, rehabilitative goal described by Chad Ferguson. They wanted emphasis placed on immediate **support services** such as **counseling, therapy** or **peer mediation**. They also stressed long-term support and prevention services such as: direct parent-family involvement; early childhood development of “self-discipline;” and ongoing feedback from the community, especially from students themselves.

Fundamentally, community members agreed with Chancellor Rhee in that student **suspension** (removal from school and instruction time) does not solve discipline problems. Topics of discussion included: gang violence; weapon possession, use, and intent; lax security guards and checkpoints; cell-phone confiscation; and profanity. Their recommendations included: expert-led programs to teach specific behavior skills for students; a trusted panel to oversee and approve of disciplinary actions at each school; and alternative outlets of punishment, like **conflict mediation**, for lesser offenses. In sum, community members wanted more attention paid to both short and long-term **support services**, and concrete evidence that their forum contributions are implemented in the new discipline policy.

**Keywords:** support services, counseling, therapy, peer mediation, suspension, conflict mediation, gang-related activity, mentor, profanity, staff support, security, parent involvement, rehabilitation, absences, behavioral, instructional peer engagement, peer mediation, mental health supports, parent-family resources.

**Presenter/ Moderator:** Chad Ferguson, Deputy Chief of Youth Engagement & Instructional Superintendent - Cluster VI

### Codes

JE: Joseph Edwards, Principals Leadership Coach

CM: Community Member

DJ: Dwan Jordan, Principal of Sousa MS

MR: Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

**Attendance:**

2 Teachers  
3 Parents (both parents and community rep)  
2 Other School staff  
9 Community representatives  
4 Students  
2 Other

**Follow Up Items:****Notes:**

**JE:** Asks for introductions. Everyone please be candid & open. *Has everyone examined the tiers?*

**CM:** Peruse through the tiers, yes, but look over extensively, no.

**JE:** Let's take 10 minutes to read through Tiers 3-5. Please highlight any personal encounters, share with group and talk about how the situation was dealt with.

**CM:** My Muslim daughter has number problems with communications – particular with slurs based on race/color/nation origin. For example, students pulled off her head scarf and talked about religion. The situation was not handled well by school administration.

**CM:** I noticed that “gang-related activity” was Tier 4 not 5. Raising fear in school should be dealt with harshly. The message should be that we do not want any gang activity at all in the school.

**JE:** *What was the reaction, how was it dealt with?*

**CM:** It is obvious who is in a gang. The students will openly tell you; you can recognize the signs immediately. For example, a music band came to school and gave shout-outs to gang members. We need to have zero tolerance. I did not think the situation was appropriately dealt with.

**CM:** The policy should clarify “**gang-related activity**,” differentiate between wearing piece of clothing or hurting someone

**CM:** *Is there a glossary? How to define sexual behavior, lewd behavior, forgery, etc.? What if you disagree with school's definition?*

**JE:** I am unsure if there is a glossary. It seems that the policies are in need of clarification so that it leaves no room for interpretation.

**CM:** There is a mini-glossary that defines some of the terms, but not all of them. It needs to be augmented.

**CM:** There are vague descriptions of “disruptive conduct” in Tier 1-4. Any interpretation can be given to student behavior; it is undefined.

**JE:** So we must clarify in each tier?

**CM:** There was a time when a teacher found a student’s knife in possession at school. The knife was not used in an actual fight.

**CM:** *What about an apple peeler, piece of glass, scissors, etc.? Are those weapons?*

**JE:** So we must clarify between POSSESSION and USE of weapon and what we mean by “weapon.”

**CM:** You must also determine the INTENT. For example, one student borrowed her Uncle’s bag but did not know a knife was inside. That is different from a student who knowingly brings a knife to school with the intent to use it.

**CM:** Students need to know a way out if they commit crime in school. Do they recover? Kids give up and make bad decisions. We don’t want them to just “give up” on school if something like this happens.

**CM:** I think “Documented pattern of consistent behavior” in Tiers 1-4 is confusing, *how many times can you do it?* Flexibility is good and bad. There needs to be a balance. The response should be left to discretion of adults, and each response should not just get the kid out of classroom. There needs to be consistent application of fairness across all schools.

**JE:** Students will go through process of redirection where the behavior is identified and worked with to remedy it. It’s an instructional process with students that requires them to think and reflect about misbehavior. The teacher/administrator must decide context of the situation and why the student is action out.

*What would strengthen the policy?*

**CM:** Students should articulate and justify each decision from tier to tier. There needs to be an account for in writing and a **mentor** helps them determine how they came to that decision and make assessments.

**CM:** If a student keeps repeating a behavior from Tier 1, we will work with student to find the underlying reason – be it a learning disability, home life problem, needing counseling, problems with outside sources. We figure out what the underlying issue is

so that it does not escalate to next tier. If it does, that means we haven't found issue yet, must work hard to build relationships with students and families.

**CM:** We should have a trusted panel of people to make final disciplinary decisions in each school. The panel should realize importance that someone's life on the line in making decisions.

**CM:** The policy has harsher punishment if **profanity** is directed toward staff than toward peers, but profanity should not be tolerated at all. It is disrespectful no matter what.

**CM:** I am a student, and we could get **suspended** for minor/unintentional offenses. It's common to not use pencils at Anacostia. It is common to use the computer without permission yet that is a Tier 2 offense and an unexcused absence is Tier 3.

**JE:** *What needs to happen to deal with the context of student misbehavior and how that relates to instruction? What could be in place?*

**CM:** I am a student at Anacostia and am a part of a youth led, after-school community organization/ advocacy group in Ward 8. We identified violence as a main problem. I support Chancellor Rhee's new model but the proposed policy does not address main problems.

We took a popular survey at Anacostia that measured effectiveness of suspension, parents, impact on grades, gauged how many people felt suspension worked, how it affected them, and how it promotes violence.

We found that 60% of students had been suspended. 48% of the students said they don't care. We found that suspension has a negative impact on grade or no impact; that it interrupts learning process. 61% of students said that suspension does not teach a lesson. 92% of students said they don't feel suspensions solve any problems.

We recommend **therapy, peer mediation, staff support**, and positive self-esteem lessons. This would be much more beneficial. The new policy will not change fighting, skipping class, improving grades, harder for teachers to suspend without solving. Teacher/admin do not have time or skills to fully address issues.

**CM:** In your survey, *did students say if suspension helped create safe atmosphere?* For example, what if in the cafeteria there was a fight between 2 gangs, and the principal suspended both groups. *Would you feel safer, now that you don't have to deal with them?*

**CM:** Yes, we would feel safer, but those who got suspended come back mad at you.

**JE:** Yes, removing students from the school does not solve the problem. It's just a temporary solution.

**CM:** Principals should monitor **security** guards and check if they are doing their job. At the last forum, we talked about how **suspension** was ineffective, **suspended** students come back to school regardless of having been **suspended**.

**CM:** For example, there was a big fight where we suspended 20 students, arrested 10 student. The same suspended and arrested students came to school the next day uncaught and walked the halls all day.

**CM:** *Isn't there a list at the front door that identifies the suspended students?* Bad kids are usually recognizable, but there are some kids you are not used to seeing getting in trouble.

**MR:** We know that's a problem. There is a plan to have students swipe IDs when enter the building. We will put the names of suspended kids on a list, and when they swipe their ID, they will be identified as student not allowed in building. With this new policy, the students must pass a **security** checkpoint instead of relying on recognition by security officers.

**CM:** Not everyone has an ID. Many students just walk through. They don't swipe; they don't carry IDs. Some **security** guards befriend the worst students and let them slip by.

**CM:** In reaching parents, it is easy to dismiss phone calls, delete voicemails, ignore teacher conferences, ignore letters.

**JE:** *How do we strengthen that then? How to better support process of identifying parents, any ideas?*

**CM:** Suspension is an option, but it doesn't teach students to learn from their mistakes.

**JE:** Yes, the response must emphasize instruction.

**CM:** **Parent involvement** is a primary factor in redirecting behavior. Students need **therapy** and sometimes parents need **therapy** too. We have younger parents in schools. They may have little parenting skills or may not have been taught or learned about personal emotional issues causing students to act out as well as underachievers. We should increase non-traditional support staff, home visits. There is insufficient staff in schools. Teachers are not trained to deal with emotional issues. Prevention begins in elementary school, but the behavior comes out in high school.

**CM:** As a kindergarten teacher, I see Tier 1 misbehavior in kindergarten. We must teach positive behaviors early. We must look at kids' home lives. Kids are taught to be responsible for each other and what they do. We need to have mechanisms for that before they get to high school.

**CM:** The tiers should explicitly state greater purpose of **rehabilitation** and look to intervening early. I got a sense of that from Chad's presentation but it is not written in policy.

**CM:** We must not allow unexcused **absences** to move on to different tier. That needs special attention.

**DJ:** Therapeutic element is key. You need parents, full service team, and the student to meet and understand why behavior took place - what issue to address and to identify a response that requires **behavioral** and **therapeutic** support. Parents must know the consequence if their kids fight. When calls go to the Chancellor's Office, it automatically develops a barrier between the school & household and the situation becomes ugly. The school should be working to have a positive relationship with community.

**CM:** Anacostia students had a bond with a teacher so discipline was not necessary, but he was fired, which messes up the environment of trust. You bring in new teachers from outside who don't know what to do and new principals every year, keeping veteran teachers/admin helps with trust/discipline too.

**CM:** *How do we develop schools where kids learn self-discipline over time? Schools should teach social skills, but how do we do that?*

**CM:** We can do that with immediate **peer engagement** to teach and by working to prevent the student from repeating the same behavior with **therapy**, **peer mediator**, and **mental health supports**.

**CM:** *Is "confiscation of item" part of discipline?* For instance, in schools you can't use a cell phone, but if a student brings cell phone, then the principal can take it.

**DJ:** There are different rules in each school. The parent must pick up an item if it has been confiscated.

**CM:** That should be in the policy. *Can rules differ from school to school? Can one school edit the policy?* Punishment for misbehavior should be based on circumstances.

**JE:** Confiscation is in different chapter of the DCMR. Every chapter is being looked at & revised. Student rights is in Chapter 24. There is room for flexibility among schools. Ch 25 is a guide for principals to use; the school policies cannot contradict Chapter 25, but schools can definitely add to it.

**CM:** We need to know the intent of using cell phones. For example, at Fletcher Johnson, a fight broke out and a student used the cell phone to call for more people to escalate the fight. There should be a phone locker where students have to check in and out their cell phones.

**CM:** Most kids would not permit for their phone to be taken away. It's a waste of time to confiscate it.

**CM:** Having a cell phone feels like a right to have.

**CM:** Students will fight with administration over their phones; they will never give up cell phones.

**CM:** The policy only “manages” behavior problems instead of solving systemic causes. It needs to view students as potential self-discipliners.

**JE:** We could have school reform coaches. In New York City, there is an advisory of trained experts teach certain skills in safe, open sanctuary to discuss social skills/effective students/home situations. The advisory is amazing if it is done correctly.

**CM:** We used to have parent coordinators in high school up until this year. We need to create a sanctuary for parents to come into school. Schools must reach out to families and have **parent-family resources** to help parents feel welcome at the school. Parents should not be contacted only with there is an issue.

**CM:** We could offer alternative option to do **conflict mediation** for earlier tie. Alcohol violation is in Tier 5. We should offer substance abuse **counseling** to deal directly with the student without having him/her miss school.

**CM:** Rules should be available to everyone in the first 30 days of school. Schools send too many things home that we are supposed to read. It is more effective to present discipline expectations directly at parent night at the beginning of the school year. Parents have to physically come to school and hear consequences because parents are surprised about misbehavior/discipline

**CM:** There's discussion but no solution to prevent misbehavior in the future. Elementary to high school is still bad. If rules don't work, then what? The principal doesn't know what to do. The only option then is suspension – especially when people ignore phone calls, throw mail in trash, what is there to do? People want to close Anacostia and make it a charter school, but the same problems will happen.

**CM:** This is the last community forum, the youth voice must be heard. *How do we know if it is being implemented?* You give us assurance but there are no immediate solutions.

**CM:** The rule-making language must contain what Chad talked about. Right now, we don't see the **instructive, rehabilitative** element in rule language. If rules don't make that explicit, then there is no obligation to do it. We all hope DCPS will do what's necessary in rule-making language, but *what if our feedback is not reflected in policy? Then what?*

**CM:** We, children, are supposed to be the future, *but if discipline has its limits then are we are just throwaways, a bad bunch of eggs?*

**JE:** Your voice is heard and will be reflected somehow in the proposed revisions.

**CM:** *Do we get to see revisions before they go to council?*

**JE:** The role of the notetakers is to make sure all comments are taken into consideration. Policy revisions are published and sent out, will have another comment period, emails, but not another forum, they'll come to you

**CM:** It seems like you are acknowledging what everyone says in forum, but we are not seeing it in implementation.

**JE:** The revisions have to go through Council, but we hope support in the instructional piece is incorporated. We encourage you to go to the hearing and testify. We appreciate testimony very much.